DOES LEARNERS' DEGREE OF EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE INFLUENCE THEIR COLLOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE?

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ABSTRACT

Collocational knowledge is indicative of the maturity of learners' language proficiency and plays an important role for ESL/EFL learners in promoting both their language comprehension and production abilities. This study specifically focused on productive and receptive Verb+ Noun and Adjective+ Noun collocational knowledge of two different groups of learners with different degrees of exposure to the English language. One hundred ninety six, 4th year university students enrolling in two different programs (International Program and English Major Program) participated in the study. Data were collected using two instruments: 1) COLLMATCH 3 receptive collocation test, and 2) productive collocation test. Results indicated that, overall, the two groups of learners had a significantly higher test score of receptive knowledge than productive knowledge, and that the international program students outperformed the English major students on both tests. Besides, the results also revealed that the participants successfully produced Adjective + Noun collocation better than Verb + Noun collocation. Finally, it is recommended that a substantial amount of time should be devoted to learning activities such as essay writing and conversation to elevate language learners' productive collocational knowledge in these two categories. For further research, focus should be given to measuring EFL learners' grammatical collocational knowledge or measuring collocational knowledge of learners with different educational levels.

KEYWORDS: Collocations, Exposure, Productive Knowledge, Receptive Knowledge, COLLMATCH 3

INTRODUCTION

Firstly introduced by J.R. Firth (1957), the father of collocation, collocation is defined as a combination of words associated with each other. To most linguists, collocation is a group or chunk of words which have a syntagmatic relation and are commonly found together (Sinclair, 1991; Nattinger, 1992; Nesselhauf, 2000; Lewis, 1993). A combination of these words are 'prefabricated chunks' that have already been memorized in the mind of native speakers and facilitate the production of language, both in speech and in writing. Instead of recalling individual words and thinking how to group them together to make them lexically correct, it would be more effective to retrieve collocations that make our language sound natural. It is acceptable for one to say "make a mistake" but not "do a mistake", "quick glance" but not "fast glance", and "raise a doubt" but not "make a doubt", for example.

Collocations consist of two parts: a node and collocate(s). A node is the key word in the collocation and collocate(s) is the word or words that comes along with the node (Nation, 2008). For example, in "quick glance",

quick is node while glance is its collocate. There are two types of collocations: grammatical and lexical collocations (Benson, Benson, and Ilson, 1986; Lewis 2000). Grammatical collocation includes a principal word that is an adjective, a verb or a noun and a grammatical word which is usually a preposition whereas lexical collocations consist only of lexical words or content words that co-occur frequently. There are 8 subtypes of grammatical collocations as follows: noun+ preposition, noun + to infinitive, noun + that clause, preposition + noun, adjective +preposition, adjective + to infinitive, adjective + that clause, and verb patterns (e.g. verb + to-infinitive, verb + bare Infinitive and other); and 7 subtypes of lexical collocations as follows: verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + noun, noun + verb, noun + of + noun, adverb + adjective, and verb + adverb.

It is believed that learners' success in language acquisition can be attributed to their collocational knowledge (Hsu, 2010; Muller, 2011). Firstly, learners with collocational mastery will be able to communicate effectively both in writing and speaking because their knowledge of collocations will enable them to naturally and accurately express their ideas, which in turn, makes them sound more native-like and more easily understood by native speakers. According to Nesselhauf, (2003) collocation is considered a prerequisite for enhancing fluency in foreign language learning. Secondly, learners with collocational mastery will also able to read at a faster rate and comprehend what is heard more easily With an extensive knowledge of how words are combined in the language, they will immediately retrieve and link the words appropriately in language production because they do not have to process individually but produce those words as multiword units.

Gyllstad (2007) maintains that collocational knowledge can be successfully acquired through a high frequency of exposure. Such exposure can be through either formal or informal language learning activities (Ajileye, S.S., 2007; Schmitt & Redwood, 2011). Formal linguistic environment typically refersto classroom settings such as listening to class presentations, sharing ideas with classmates and giving oral presentations. Informal linguistic environment is incidental language learning which learners can acquire outside the classroom such as reading printed materials, watching television programs, listening to the radio and communicating with others through interactive social networking sites.

The conceptualization of lexical knowledge consists of two areas: receptive and productive. Receptive vocabulary knowledge refers to the ability to recognize a word during reading or listening activities whereas productive knowledge refers to the ability to produce a word in the form of writing or speaking. Measuring collocational knowledge falls into two categories as well i.e measuring levels of receptive and productive collocational knowledge. Previous studies have been conducted to assess both receptive and productive lexical skills of EFL / ESL learners such as studies by Bahns & Eldaw (1993); Biskup (1992); Schmitt (1998); Bonk (2000); Ellis (2001); Gyllstad (2005) and Szudarski (2012).

Designed by Gyllstad (2005), a series of tests called COLLEX and COLLMATCH were used to measure receptive collocational knowledge and proved highly reliable. Bergström (2008) adopted "COLLMATCH 3" to examine the receptive collocation knowledge of Swedish students and found that the test is valid, reliable, and easy to score. Szudarski (2012) used 3 types of gap filling tests (2 for productive and 1 receptive skills) to assess learners' productive and receptive collocational knowledge. For productive test type 1, learners were required to produce the whole collocation based on L1 meaning. For type 2, learners had to fill in the gap with the node (i.e. L2 collocate was provided). To test learners' receptive knowledge, learners were required to complete a series of multiple- choice gap- fill questions by selecting from a choice of four L2 node.

When compared to general vocabulary acquisition, L2 collocational acquisition might be more problematic for language learners because collocation is a complex concept of knowledge (Nesselhauf, 2003 & Mahmoud, 2005) because a high frequency of exposure is required to acquire collocational knowledge. Typically, language learners learn individual words without paying much attention to word relationships as a result, they are often not aware of the differences in collocational restrictions between the L1 and L2 (Zarei, 2002). Coupled with the influence of their surrounding environment and everyday interaction in their mother tongue, language learners tend to opt for direct translation at their disposal, which does not sound natural to native speakers. As a result of limited language experience, EFL learners tend to adopt certain strategies such as relying on their L1 equivalents and synonyms as well as using their own creativity (Shih, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003 & Yumanee, 2013) in producing collocations, thus resulting in collocational errors. According to Nesselhauf (2003); Li (2005) & Koya, (2005), Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun collocation have been found to be the most problematic categories of collocations for EFL learners.

Given that target language exposure is fundamental to the success of language learning, it is worthwhile to investigate this aspect with two groups of learners in Thailand who have relatively higher exposure to English than other types of learners. These two groups are international students (INS) and English major students (EMS). The INS group differs from the EMS group in that they are studying in Hospitality and Tourism Management and Business Administration Programs in which English is used as the medium of instruction, while both Thai and English are used as mediums of instruction for the EMS group. This study was conducted to investigate whether students with different degrees of exposure would possess different levels of collocational knowledge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Is there a significant difference in the collocational competence of international program students when compared to English major students?

- Is there a significant difference between two groups of learners' receptive and productive collocational knowledge?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 4th year students of Prince of Songkla University, Thailand, in the academic year 2013. The INS group referred to the students enrolling in the Business Administration International Program (66 students) and the Hospitality and Tourism Management International Program (50 students). The EMS group were students who enrolled in the English Major Program (80 students). Before taking the collocational test, all of them completed the World English Placement Test Package, adopted from Chase (2011). The test was used as a benchmark to establish their English language proficiency before taking the two collocation tests. The test results showed a significant difference in their level of proficiency, i.e. students in the EMS group were placed in the lower intermediate level and the INS group in the intermediate level.

Target Collocations

Drawing upon the existing literature conducted in this area (Gyllstad, 2007; Shehata, 2008), there were 547 collocations, as shown in Table 1. They were classified into 2 major groups and 4 sub-groups; 2 sub-groups under

lexical collocation (V + N and Adj + N) and 2 sub-groups under grammatical collocation (N + Preposition and V + Preposition). To arrive at the target collocations, firstly, only the most problematic categories of collocations for EFL learners were extracted. This resulted in 352 collocations remaining (247 V + N collocations and 105 Adj + N collocations). Secondly, all 352 collocations were consulted against the British National Corpus (BNC 2007) to identify the high frequency collocations and to make sure that they had at least 100 occurrences in BNC (Davies, 2004). The reason for choosing BNC was that it is one of the largest corpora publicly available and its complete corpus can be downloaded. This resulted in 146 collocations. Thirdly, the researchers referred further to the Online Oxford Collocation dictionary for Students of English (2002) and Collocation checker to make sure that the target collocations were listed as collocations in those two sources. The result showed that all 146 examples were listed as collocations. Finally, the researchers consulted 3 EFL experts to check for the reliability of the tests. To allow for a reasonable administration time, the experts suggested reducing the number of the target words to be tested. Therefore, the target collocations which had the least BNC occurrences were excluded. The final number of the target collocations was 90. (45 V + N collocations e.g. take place, make an effort, seize opportunity, and 45 Adj + N collocations e.g. common sense, classical music, soft drink).

Table 1: Number of Target Collocations

Number of Target Collocation			
Collocation	**Gyllstad, (2007) & Shehata, (2008)**	**BNC & Collocation Checker**	**EFL Experts**
Verb+Noun	247	90	45
Adjective+Noun	105	56	45
Noun+Preposition	110	Excluded	
Verb+Preposition	85		
Total	**547**	**146**	**90**

Test Construction

Receptive Test

To be consistent with the goal of testing both productive and receptive collocation knowledge, the same target collocations were used in both tests. The receptive collocation test adopted the test format called "COLLMATCH 3", developed by Gyllstad (2007). The test included 90 possible English collocations, and the participants were required to tick the box that said "yes" if they thought the collocation was a word combination is used in English, otherwise they ticked the box that said "no". Below are three examples of "COLLMATCH 3" test used in the current study.

1. **Take Place**
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

2. **Next Week**
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

3. **Do Crime**
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

After the test was constructed, it was then submitted to 3 EFL Experts to ensure content validity. Some modifications regarding distractors were made, for example, custom life as a distractor for daily life was changed to every daily life, and better wishes as a distractor for best wishes was changed to happy wishes. The test then waspiloted with a group of learners who had a parallel English ability to the participants in this study. The result from piloting showed that the test had a high internal consistency (α = .8437).

Productive Test

The productive test employed a gap filling format adapted from Szudarski (2000). The test required learners to produce a node themselves by referring to the given collocates and its L1 equivalence in parentheses. Below are examples of the productive test.

- _____place (เกิดขึ้น)

- _____ week (สัปดาห์ถัดไป)

- _____ crime (ก่ออาชญากรรม)

Modification of the productive test was carried out because the Thai equivalent was wrong or ambiguous such as ทำให้คืบหน้า in "make progress" was replaced by มีความก้าวหน้า, ใช้ in "make use" was replaced by ใช้ประโยชน์, and กาแฟที่แรงมาก in "strong coffee" was replaced by กาแฟแก่. Also, such collocations as "make statement", "fine arts" and "capital punishment" were omitted because they appeared to be unfamiliar by Thai students at this level. The result from piloting showed that the test had a high internal consistency (α = .9293).

Data Collection

The instruments were then administered to participants in a single session in their plenary class after a 15 minutes break between the tests. To avoid a serial effect, productive test was given first, followed by the receptive test after a 15 minutes break. The participants spent 2 hours completing the two tests.

RESULTS

Collocational Knowledge of the INS and the EMS

Figure 1 reveals a statistically significant difference between the two groups of participants in both their receptive knowledge of collocations ($t = 2,97 df= 194$, $p < .05$, sig. 2-tailed = .003) and their productive knowledge of collocation ($t = 6.18$, $df= 148.29$, $p < .05$, sig. 2-tailed = .000). Overall, INS outperformed their counterparts in all respects. That is, the INS mean scores on the receptive and productive tests (69.86 & 46.10 respectively) were significantly higher than those of the EMS (64.94 & 32.75). This indicates that INS had more advanced collocation competence when compared to that of the EMS.
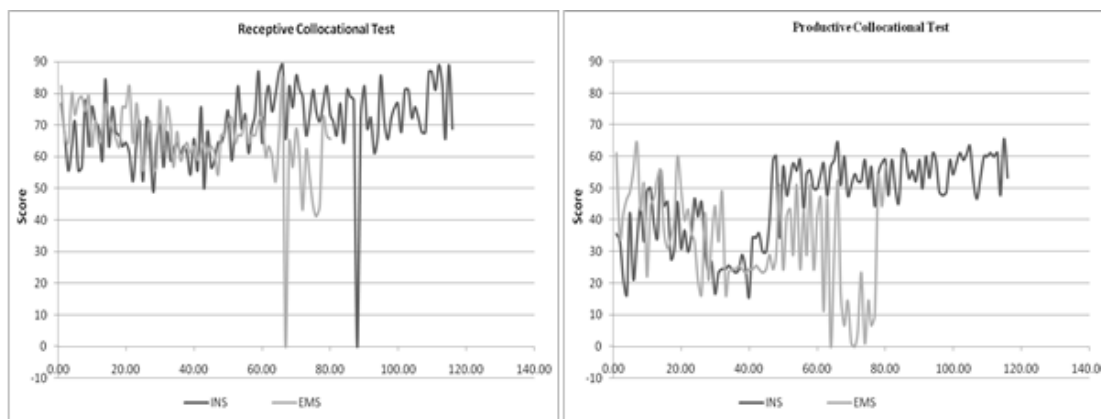

Figure 1: Receptive and Productive Test Scores of INS and EMS

Receptive and Productive Collocational Knowledge

As Table 2 indicates, the t-test results revealed a significant difference between the mean scores of the receptive and productive tests of the two groups INS (t = 6.18, df= 194, p < .05, sig. 2-tailed = .000) and EMS (t = 2.97, df= 194, p < .05, sig. 2-tailed = .003). The receptive test's mean scores for both INS and EMS in the two types of collocation (Verb +Noun and Adj + Noun) were larger (70.10, 69. 61; 67.58, 62.30) than those of the productive test (43.90, 48.30; 30.24 & 35.28), which demonstrated that both groups of participants did better on receptive knowledge of collocations than productive knowledge of collocations. However, in the productive test, the participants' verb-noun score (43.90 & 30.24) were found to be lower than their adjective-noun score (48.30 & 35.28), which shows participants' difficulty in producing acceptable verb-noun collocations despite their familiarity with the target words included in the test.

Table 2: Participants' Receptive and Productive Scores (Independent Sample T-Tests)

Test	INS (n = 116)		EMS (n = 80)		t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D			
Receptive Test							
Verb+ Noun	70.10	12.02	67.58	14.34	1.331	194	.185
Adj.+ Noun	69.61	12.03	62.30	13.26	4.011	194	.000
Total	**69.86**	**11.38**	**64.94**	**11.42**	**2.969**	**194**	**.003**
Productive Test							
Verb+ Noun	43.90	15.37	30.24	17.24	5.815	194	.000
Adj.+ Noun	48.30	12.13	35.28	16.20	6.105	138	.000
Total	**46.10**	**13.17**	**32.75**	**15.94**	**6.175**	**148.29**	**.000**

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Receptive and Productive Knowledge of Collocations

The main focus of this study was to compare the collocational knowledge of two groups of learners from different learning environments. The result found that both INS and EMS's receptive knowledge of collocations was higher than their productive knowledge. This finding is not surprising because it has been shown that the receptive knowledge typically precedes productive mastery (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000). This was also consistent with the studies of Koya (2005) and Shehata (2008), which found that the subjects were able to judge the correctness of the target collocations in the receptive test but they encountered difficulties in producing the correct collocations in the productive test. Also, it was found in Brashi's study (2005) that the participants in their studies had low collocation competence regarding production knowledge, but performed better in recognizing a wide range of collocations derived from listening and reading.

Basically, productive collocational knowledge will expand when receptive collocational knowledge develops (Shehata, 2008). However, the result of this study showed the growth in participant's receptive skill but poor achievement in their productive skill. As a result, the participants in this study adopted strategies such as guessing, for example, they chose 'summary a conclusion' for 'draw a conclusion' and used 'elder age' for 'old age. Another strategy they employed was L1 dependence as in choosing 'show away' for 'give away' and 'important day' for 'big day. The last strategy they adopted was using their own creativity such as 'jot a diary' for 'keep a diary' and 're-thought' for 'second thought'. This is consistent with the studies of Nessel hauf (2003); Li (2005); and Koya (2005) who revealed that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun were found to be problematic categories of collocations for EFL learners.

A closer look at the participants' performance on the productive test demonstrated that they were able to produce Adjective + Noun collocations more accurately than Verb + Noun collocations. It can be argued that this phenomenon was caused by positive interlingual transfer in that L1 equivalent provided in the productive test influenced their decision which, in turn, enabled them to directly translate the Adjective + Noun collocations verbatim. For example, in 'middle class', the meaning for the node in Thai is กลาง and the collocate is ชนชั้น, or in 'old age', the meaning for the node in Thai is ปัจฉิม /แก่and the collocate is วัย, also in 'daily life' the meaning for the node in Thai is ประจำวัน and the collocate is ชีวิต. For this, Park (2003) maintains that even advanced EFL learners rely on L1 in L2 communication because they assume a one-to-one correspondence between L1 and L2. Another plausible explanation as to why the participants in this study fared well in Adjective + Noun collocations could be because they are collocations (old age, middle class, and daily life) which have high frequencies as shown in BNC (1265, 919 & 253, respectively). Such high frequencies might offer the participants higher exposure to the collocations (Miyakoshi, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the current study, it is recommended that teachers should pay particular attention to the teaching productive skills associated with collocations by engaging students in essay writing and conversation exercises. In addition, teachers should also pay attention to the teaching of Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun collocations as they appear to be the most problematic categoriesfor students.

For further study, it is recommended that future researchers might wish to measure students' grammatical collocations to obtain a better knowledge of EFL students' collocational competence or to compare collocational knowledge of learners at different grade levels such as primary 6 and high-school students as they have different degrees ofexposure to English, also if further study wish to obtain more in-depth information concerning frequency of exposure, interviews should be included as another data collection instrument.

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